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ABSTRACT

Librarians' work has become more challenging and complex over the past 15 years. Fifteen years ago, the telephone was a librarian's most used and most effective instrument, and librarians mostly relied on the resources within their own walls. In that era, resource sharing placed substantial burdens on larger libraries, and the resources of smaller libraries were not adequately realized or utilized. Now, the growing coverage of machine-readable files has meant that resource sharing has the potential to be a more evenhanded burden, since librarians have a better grasp of the multiple locations of materials that would have remained unknown in the past. In the near future, technologies--e.g., electrocopying--will create new conceptions of resources and methods of information accession, and librarians must master those techniques to best serve their patrons. In the meantime, the success of resource sharing pivots on academic, public, school, and special librarians' willingness to work together and cooperate. If it is necessary to look outside their own collection, librarians must ascertain whether the patron wants the information quickly (and expensively) by fax machine or more slowly (and less expensively) by interlibrary loan. (4 references) (SD)

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RESOURCE SHARING IN AN ELECTRONIC AGE:
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

by

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RESOURCE SHARING IN AN ELECTRONIC AGE:
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

During our grandparents' and parents' lives, automobiles, the telephone and telegraph, radio and television, and air-travel burst upon them in a somewhat orderly but accelerating progression. At least, it seems so to us. The electronic age has burst upon us in the library with a speed which has surprised all of us, and I would like to spend a few minutes with you this morning considering what has happened, what is happening, and what may happen, and how we can conceptualize our role in the process.

Only 20 years ago, some of you may remember, we were being introduced to database searches, which were a way of quickly (and expensively) finding out, for example, what journal articles had been published on selected topics. DIALOG comes to mind, still going strong, and other similar databases. BRS came later, and then around 1975 or so OCLC appeared on the national scene, following CLSI and other similar localized databases. RLIN responding to academic research libraries' needs soon followed, and around the country all kinds of attempts got underway to automate bibliographic records and make them accessible both near and far. Some of these attempts succeeded and others failed, but the successes have been the bases for astonishing developments.

Only 15 years ago, when library service was simpler, we relied a lot more on the resources within our own walls. When we needed to, we checked the National Union Catalog, if we could afford to have it, and other union lists for the limited number of locations listed where materials needed might be found. The patchwork of union list coverage blanketing regions of the country was uneven in its currency and completeness, and was often used as a last resort, when a telephone call to a nearby library would not do.

Yes, the telephone was then our most used and effective instrument. It

still is an effective instrument, of course, but other powerful tools have supplemented the telephone. Everyone realized it was not very efficient to call the smaller libraries in the local area. The chances of getting what you wanted in them was small. So you called the nearest large library for help. The chances were greater it was there, even though for the most part you had no idea what the holdings were--not really.

The pressure on the large libraries became acute, and it became expensive for them to respond to pleas for help. Curbs were placed on loan requests and the time it took to get loans processed and delivered became distressingly long. The resources of the smaller libraries were mostly unknown, or known in the most spotty way.

Now, let's not pretend all this has completely changed, but the overall situation has improved immensely. With our computer terminals we can search painstakingly compiled bibliographic databases, identify specific items, their locations, and request them on loan if we need them, and if libraries are willing to lend.

Again, we don't have to pretend that all of us have changed our ways. Some of us cannot afford the new technology and rely on others who can help us out, but the net effect of the new developments has been to diffuse the pressure on the larger libraries. The growing coverage of machine-readable files has meant we have a better grasp of the multiple locations of materials we could not possibly have known in the past. What is more, the data is up-to-date, for the most part. In a crucial way, sharing resources has become a more truly even-handed burden.

That's not to say our problems have diminished. Technology's very success in evening out the pressures caused by interlibrary loan needs has shifted the concentrated demands made on the larger libraries on to the smaller libraries whose collections are much better known if they are revealed in a database, but

which are often not well staffed to handle them.

Which leads to an assumption commonly made in cooperative resource systems, and often formalized in rules and regulations, namely, that participants in such systems must contribute equitably to the systems which they will benefit from. It seems obvious that if all, or even a majority and perhaps if just a significant fraction of participants in a cooperative system largely relied on the system, rather than on their own efforts to meet their own needs, cooperation would come under great stress.

So, the librarian of today must have an overall vision of how cooperation works, even while having available all the technical wonders which could, if pushed, supply a fairly large response to needs made known. The librarian of today must be aware of the ways technology can help, but he or she must still fight for budget to fund their libraries' own needs significantly. It is the vital contribution to the activity of cooperation which none of us can do without.

Resource sharing can be done in so many ways today, with the appropriate equipment. We have mentioned the telephone already, and computer terminals which can search databases of unbelievably diverse kinds. In the 1989 edition of the Computer-Readable Databases--a directory and data source book, Martha Williams, in her foreword, says the directory covers 4200 databases and refers to families of databases as well as single ones. (1) We cannot possibly be familiar with them all, but we probably should know something about some of them. We must outline to a patron how he or she can acquire the information needed. Will it be from their own collection? That's one set of possible alternatives. Or will it be from a source outside of their own library? That's another whole set of possibilities. We can offer to get such information quickly (and usually more costly) by fax-machine, online on a computer, more slowly (and less expensively) on interlibrary loan, or we could advise a patron to go to a nearby local library perhaps for a

loan based on reciprocal agreements.

Not only must librarians today at the management level choose from an immense and growing array of equipment and services when they can afford to meet their patrons' needs, they must also be able to tailor for individual patrons specific menus to help them get what they want. Such menus will be lists of different ways to get what is needed with cost estimates included, and the time it takes to fill the need.

In a constantly changing technological environment, the ways to get information and materials economically is changing, and as librarians we must master some of these techniques in order to serve our patrons well. Our patrons are rarely aware of what we are doing, and in many cases our organizational superiors are ill-informed as well. We ourselves may only be able to keep up with a fraction of what is going on in the field of information, but to many it will seem amazing we can track down what is needed and arrange for delivery, in a prompt and competent manner.

Oh, it is true alright, there are large organizations and professional firms which will have more expertise than librarians. There will be individuals too, in fact, increasing numbers of them, who outside of libraries are capable of doing what we are trying to do in libraries. But just as we serve patrons who themselves own books and have access to tons of information on their own, we also serve those who don't, and we are a resource for those who do not have their own equipment or who cannot afford to use the professional information companies.

As librarians, and especially those of us who directly serve the public, we hold the positions of increasing value and growing importance. We hold positions which mediate between informational needs and their satisfaction in a field which is highly complex and continuously changing.

In a mere 15 years, many of us have seen our professional capacities to help

our patrons increase dramatically. Our work though has not become easier, but rather more challenging and complex. We might have had to persuade our superiors to fund online database searching, to explain why CD-ROMs could be so useful, and to weigh the merits of full-text searching as against the use of fax-machines, or develop arguments to support the use of both.

Electrocopying--the reproduction of printed material in electronic form--without the use of duplicating machines--from computer to computer locally, nationally and around the world is beginning to take off,⁽²⁾ and when an integrated system's digital network is finally established⁽³⁾ voice, video, and data transmissions could become commonplace eliminating many distinctions between reports, publications, databases, records and the like⁽⁴⁾ creating quite new conceptions of resources and how we can access them quickly, and, dare one hope, inexpensively.

How will we cope with all of these new developments overtaking us even before we have fully mastered the technology of today? We will do the best we can with what we have, and learn to walk with what we now use before we can run in the bigger leagues. There is no doubt though the demands on us will be greater.

We are all painfully aware that libraries are insufficiently funded. We are never likely to have all staff we feel we need, nor the necessary equipment, and rarely the other material resources to support instruction and research. So, while resource sharing is a necessity for most of us to some degree, we may not have the time to keep up with the latest equipment and services that can help us. We need help, the help that large cooperatives can offer: advice, and training, database management, and equipment maintenance. Imagine the time it would take to cover all these needs on our own.

Resource sharing in an electronic age is the conscious putting together of people, knowledge and equipment. All are important, but the most important is

people, people with vision and who have a willingness to work together. The grander the vision of what's to be done, the more librarians of different backgrounds must try to cooperate: academic and public librarians, special and school librarians. Each kind of library has something to contribute as well as something to gain.

Lastly, as resource sharing has gathered strength, it is only natural that more attention has been paid to regional and national resources themselves, with attempts being made to map the strengths and weaknesses of network collections, as illustrated by the Alaska Collection Development Manual, the Chicago Public Library's Central Library Collection Development Statement, the Illinois Collections Analysis Matrix, the Pacific Northwest Conspectus and Collection Assessment Manual and several other efforts. These are ambitious attempts to manage regional resources by ensuring that basic needs can be covered adequately.

My colleagues, I am sure, will add to an account of these efforts.

Submitted by,

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